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BOOK REVIEWS

MURAL PAINTING IN AMERICA. By Edwin H. Blashfield. New York : Charles Scribner's Sons. \$2.50

Few things in the history of art have been more noteworthy than its sudden flowering in America within the past twenty years. The days of Michelangelo and Raphael were the culmination of a development that had been in progress for two hundred years. In America art has flamed up suddenly, as it did in Holland after its liberation.

Our beginnings were hopeful. Our early architecture was simple, but it was dignified and pleasing. Then followed the dreariest period perhaps in all the history of the world. Our architecture, which is always the art that leads, sank to incredible depths of commonplace ugliness. Fortunately, most of the private dwellings of those days were built in flimsy fashion, and will not long survive to tell the story of our shame; but unhappily there are a number of public edifices that will probably pass down to future generations the record of those melancholy middle ages of our artistic darkness.

The first signs of new life were shown in Boston, where a Southern architect, transplanted to New England, reared the noble Romanesque church that is now Trinity Cathedral and where the pure lines of the Public Library would have delighted the eye of a Florentine.

But the great awakening came with the Chicago Fair in 1893; and it proved that it was not artistic genius that had been lacking, but public support of talent. In these stucco palaces that were to last but for a summer the architects were given free rein; and the magic white city that sprang up around that emerald basin recalled alike—

"The glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome."

Everyone came to see and lingered to admire. It marked a new Renaissance, not only in America, but throughout the world. The public taste was cultivated; the public interest in architecture was aroused. Beautiful buildings sprang up on

every hand. The Library of Congress, with its hall of the fifty columns and its lovely dome, presented scenes of bewildering beauty. The State Capitol at St. Paul became an example of a perfect public edifice, combining nobility of style with splendor and utility. The Mint at Denver would be a delight to the eyes of Brunelleschi; and now the Woolworth Building in New York has shown us how the sky-scraper can be made a thing of sublime and radiant beauty, soaring to heaven in a glorious Gothic in dizzy heights that dwarf the Cathedral of Cologne. But perhaps the best way to realize the suddenness and completeness of this new Renaissance is to compare the stations which the Pennsylvania Railroad erected in Philadelphia before the Chicago Fair and the one that it has since erected in New York; the first vast in size, but petty and pretentious in style, the last comparable in the grandeur of its proportions with the temples of Karnac and the Baths of Caracalla. These are particularly shining examples of the new birth of architecture among us; but there is scarcely a community in America now that cannot point with justifiable pride to some edifice whose pure lines would rejoice the eye even of a Greek.

Such buildings cry aloud for decoration. Their beauty is too great to remain unadorned. We delight to heap ornaments on a beautiful form, just as the piling of ornaments upon one that is ugly offends our sense of the appropriate.

When the buildings of the Chicago Fair were erected, men naturally enquired, "Where are we to get the painters for the mural decorations?" Boston had been compelled to send to Europe for the paintings that adorn her library. Yet "as if by the stroke of an enchanter's wand," there sprang to the task a number of painters hitherto almost unknown, who revealed a rare genius for mural decoration. The pictures were necessarily hasty; but with few exceptions they were delightful in color, noble in conception, and just in their proportions. The surprising success attending their efforts has led to the adornment of the walls of our public buildings everywhere. And so nobly have our artists responded to the demand that to-day the American school of mural painting leads the world. The diversity of their talents is such that no matter what style of

decoration one desires, he can find the man to carry it out in delightful fashion. Yet they form truly a school in the youthful freshness of their inspiration, in their sanity and nobility of view, so free from the decadent tendencies now prevailing in Continental Europe.

It is just that this splendid movement should find a voice, and it is fortunate that the voice is that of Mr. Blashfield, its accepted leader. He has every qualification for the task. Everyone who has consulted his notes to Vasari's "Lives" knows how profound is his knowledge of the art of the past. In the delightful book, *Italian Cities*, which he wrote in conjunction with Mrs. Blashfield, there is a chapter on "Raphael as a Fresco Painter," which is not only the best criticism of Raphael but the best exposition of the principles of fresco painting to be found anywhere. Of all living mural painters he best carries on the glorious tradition of Raphael, wedding clarity of composition, purity of line and beauty of color with depth of thought and nobility of feeling. His pictures, like Raphael's, are not only a joy to the eye, but an inspiration to higher things. His style is strongly individual; yet the breadth of his culture and sympathy is such that he can appreciate every form of merit.

His work is not merely, as its name would imply, a chronicle of mural painting in our country. Indeed, for that he allows the numerous illustrations to speak for the most part. It is an exposition of the eternal principles of mural decoration applicable to all ages and all countries, and with instruction drawn alike from the art of the past and of the present. Having devoted his whole life to the study of the subject and to its practice, he is qualified as few are to treat his theme. Indeed, it is doubtful whether there is in the world to-day anyone who by a combination of general culture and technical knowledge is so competent to speak. The lucid and pleasing style makes the book agreeable reading, and it should be in the hands of everyone entrusted with the adornment of public or private buildings. By reading it one will learn to avoid a thousand pitfalls that lie in the way of him who would make a home beautiful. To the architect and to the mural painter it will henceforth be indispensable.

GEORGE B. ROSE.